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THE LONG SWATH—A DEVONSHIRE FARM STUDY

By N. H. J. BAIRD

From exhibition of "Rustic Horse Life" at the Carroll Gallery

Current Art Topics

By "MAHLSTICK," London Correspondent

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THE War Relief Exhibition, which opened in January at the Royal Academy, is in many ways unique in that long series which, from the spacious days of Sir Joshua Reynolds have continued, uninterrupted by wars or revolutions, down to our own strenuous time. It marks a portentous break with the time-honored tradition of Privilege, which has hitherto been so jealously maintained against all comers by the English Royal Academy. For in this exhibition *mirabile dictu* Academicians have been accorded no sort of priority or precedence over the exhibitors from the outside. Their names instead of heading the lists in leaded type in the catalogue, just take their place as they come alphabetically

with the others, and, most revolutionary of innovations, these latter are designated by the initials of the various societies to which they belong—it is John Brown R. B. A. just as big and bold as Sir Edward Poynter R. A., or John Singer Sargent R. A. I believe this is the first time in its history that the Royal Academy has officially recognized the existence of any other society—in fact in its early days no member was allowed to belong to another under penalty of expulsion. It is difficult perhaps for my artist readers, who happily have not cowered as it were in the shadow of Burlington House, and under the high-toned crusted conservatism of official English art to realize the change towards democratic ways



APRIL—A DEVONSHIRE FARM STUDY

From exhibition of "Rustic Horse Life" at the Carroll Gallery By N. H. J. BAIRD

which is thus indicated. Trifles light as air, yet they are signs of the times, presaging also in their degree, those many other world-changes so widely anticipated as the result of the Great War.

Turning to the exhibition itself, the welcome, or at least tolerance accorded to work usually anathema to academic ideals, comes as a shock to our eyes accustomed to the orderly pictorial array, which we are invited to admire, year in, year out, on these spacious walls. The collection of pictures is, however, distinctly interesting and instructive, from the very fact of its assembling together such extremes in artistic ideals, as the Victorian sentiment and paint of Joseph Clark's "Our Daily Bread" and the 20th Century canvas—one cannot call it a picture—by Walter Sickert, pretentiously named the "Integrity of Belgium" or the

splashed pigment on a panel by Simon Bussy, which we learn from the catalogue materializes in color "Bouquet de Fleurs." The Victorian picture viewed as art, is utterly banal in its cheap hackneyed sentiment, and in its meagre and begrudged paint, but at least it is capable of conveying some sort of idea and feeling to certain simple types of souls: whilst Sickert's work—Bussy's is beneath consideration—conveys nothing to the spectator except that of a rough, clumsy sketch of a soldier who does not happen to be in khaki; it has more coherence of drawing and color than is generally associated with Sickert's work; this much can be admitted—though without indeed necessarily admitting much. In the conflict of the varied periods and styles comprised within these two extremes there can however be no question that the mod-

ern has the best of it. The painters in the earlier vein show nothing to compare with Richard Jack's refugee picture "Whither" or Connard's "Interior," full of light, yet with a dignity and sombreness of tone, very impressive.

Sargent's powerful record in photographic paint entitled "Rialto" also combines luminosity and tone. This quality of tone universally characterized the painting of the mediaeval masters and their successors, but in the courageous attempt to reproduce the local color and daylight of nature, made by the middle Victorians—a reaction from the "brown as a fiddle" convention—it was lost to landscape painting for more than a generation. The French *Plein Air* realists and the Impressionists equally lacked it, as did the Barbizon School. The German and Dutch Schools held on better, though in the former, tone was allied to heavy rank color. Again, for the management and control of the paint, its texture and surface, the palm remains easily with the modern and the English School. In fact among our younger men technique would appear to have reached the apex of its possibilities; it is bold, free and solid, but fluent to express and convey. Yet alongside this accomplished craftsmanship we find—typical of the flux and ferment of the age—other cliques and coteries discarding what technical skill they happen to have, and aping the feeble drawing and brush work of children or imbeciles, Mr. Augustus John—the Camden Town School—the Post Impressionists and the rest readily come to our minds in this connection. Some of the "advanced" pictures in their color schemes seem deliberately designed in their harsh and acid blues and greens as in the "Green Blinds" by Frieseke "Nymphs at Seaford" by Douglas Robinson, to rasp and distress our eyes.

It was very satisfactory to note however, that these ultra modern pictures, this would-be super-art, contrasted with the surrounding normal competent work, did not rise

even to the suggestion of an effort or an experiment, they simply looked fatuous and incompetent, and one passed on. As I descended the stairs, and crossed the spacious quadrangle into Piccadilly, reflecting on the heterogeneous character of the exhibition, the varied and unrelated character of so much there, the individualism for better or for worse so widely in evidence, one conclusion seemed undeniable; that whatever doubts and misgivings some of us may have entertained about the ultimate outcome of that revolt against the authority, and conventions of the past, which so markedly signalizes the present day, it cannot be gainsaid that the immediate result is the complete freedom it has conferred on the varied types of the artistic temperament, with their specific gifts, qualities and their limitations, to find expression each in its own way. The painter is now, as never before, a law unto himself in relation to his work; its method, its formula, its technique; and above all he rests secure in the knowledge that the verdict of his audience, will be determined by one test only—the measure of his aesthetic and emotional appeal.

Thus free to follow its own impulses, art has manifested itself in new forms and phases, which conformity to the older canons would forever have rendered still-born. It is not easy, for instance, to imagine how Whistler's delicate art, could have bloomed to maturity amongst the intolerant hide-bound ideals of the eighteenth century. It is more than probable that he would have continued to adorn the profession of engineer which he had originally adopted. Can we possibly think of him with his suggestive tentative brush, covering the Dome of St. Paul's, or Alderman Beckford's dining-room ceiling, with classic allegories, Tritons and sea nymphs, etc., after the "Grand Manner," in emulation of Sir James Thornhill the father-in-law of Hogarth—and at the fixed price of forty shillings per square yard! Per contra it is scarcely less difficult to imagine the connoisseurs and dilettanti

of that day who had made the "Grand Tour" and had returned to prate glibly of "Vertu," etc., tolerating or even faintly glimpsing the elusive charm of a Nocturne or a Symphony.

Surveying the art of the past, that matchless and priceless heritage of ours, we see that vast and catholic as was its scope, yet in its scheme no room was found, or place allotted to anyone whose genius and inspiration were not sustained by a corresponding technical power. For "unskilled labor" our forbears had no manner of use. "Soul and artistic instinct" divorced from craftsmanship were to them unthinkable. We, more tolerant in our day, are persuaded that they lost much well worth having, to wit, such as the subtle artistry of a Whistler, or a Collings, the dream-color of a fan by Conder, the sparkle, vivacity and movement of a Melville, or the suggestive fantasy, romance and glowing harmonies of a Monticelli. Perhaps, however, on second thought, and with the recollection of the "Isms" fresh in our minds, we may grant that if our ancestors missed much, they undoubtedly escaped much.

The renunciation of allegiance to the stricter canons of former days, included in its "declaration of rights" issues more important than the admittance to the sacred precincts of the Temple of Art some hitherto excluded; it claimed for art but more especially in landscape far wider and more drastic powers to deal with, modify, mould and subordinate the facts and phenomena of Nature to the pictorial expression of the painter's vision or mood; we will be helped to a clearer understanding of the point, by a brief consideration of the theory and practice which has governed landscape painting right down the centuries, from the classic serenity of Claude Loraine to the crude realism of Claude Monet, which was to base the composition of a picture on perspective, aerial and linear, and the consequent graduated recession in values and dimensions from the spectator, of the objects depicted. This principle involved logically that the

full gamut of Nature's tones and definitions, from foreground to distance, should be given.

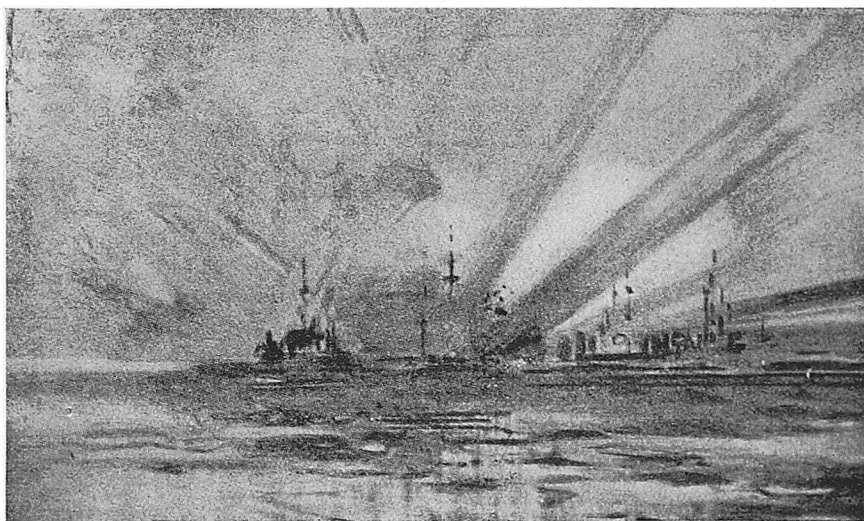
These laws reigned unquestioned till, so to speak, yesterday, and in all probability they will retain their predominance to the end. But nevertheless out of the East has arisen a rival, or at least an alternative principle—"The Decorative"; this replaces or subordinates perspective to mass arrangement and spacing of tone and color as in a Persian rug, and much that is new and rare, has been gained for Western art. We must of course guard against carrying these distinctions to extremes. Neither of these two principles ever have, or ever can be wholly absent from any picture but one or other can form the chief basis of its composition, with results that can differ as widely as, for instance the work of Constable does from that of Hiroshige. In the earlier art of the West, Velasquez and some of the primitives anticipated the "Decorative" concept; centuries later the English Pre-Raphaelites — perhaps unconsciously — produced much work in line with it. Whistler through the art of Japan came directly under its sway, whilst in our own day, it profoundly influences and shapes the work of such men as Charles Sims, Edward Stott, Hornel, and perhaps even more notable Charles John Collings, the exhibition of whose water color drawings of the Rocky Mountains at the Art Institute in your city last year, revealed his unique genius to the art public of the middle West. The work of N. H. J. Baird in its later and finest phase witnesses also the emancipation resulting from the "decorative" conception of pictorial treatment. His ability to express and to convey to us so convincingly the idyllic spirit of the countryside, of the life of the tiller of the soil, to show us the poetry and beauty of the plough, the furrow, and the team, is due in no small measure to the liberty to select and reject without question the facts and values of Nature as they contribute or not to his ideal. In the picture "The Long Swath" reproduced

herein, the full relation of foreground, tone values and definition, to the finished detail and full modeling of the horses, is not attempted to be kept, if it were, the darks and lights and shapes would be perspectively in Nature far stronger and more telling, than anything in the horses or the mower or the man. But let my readers fill in in their minds what I have suggested is left out, and try and imagine how much of the charm and poetry of the subject, or of the emphasized beauty of the horses would be retained. The composition of this picture is structurally founded on perspective, on the recession of mass and line from the machine and man to the noble form and curves of the horses, thence to the continuing sweep of the swaths, away to the horizon.

Thus far art and Nature have gone hand in hand, but now the painter has felt that to continue to follow Nature in her uncompromising insistence on each fact and tone, would be to smother or minimize those points, by which he hoped to give the poetry and essential beauty of his subject. Note for instance how the eye travels at once from the foreground to the superb modeling of the horses, to the play of the great muscles of their haunches, rejoicing in their strength and ability to accomplish the task

set them, just as likewise no distracting details in the simple but suggestive horizon divert our attention from the beauty of the heads coming against it. The landscape is thoroughly suggestive of the spirit of the English countryside, and we rest content with it. The other picture "April" illustrated here is simpler in its conception and decorative arrangement. The canvas is just spaced into two planes—the horses, and a sky full of the iridescence of Spring—the horses rough, unkempt, on their way to their work. A plain page from rustic life, yet idyllic. These works by N. H. J. Baird, who stands quite alone in the opinion of many as a delineator of rustic horse life, have enabled me, I hope, to make clear by concrete example, my contention that art has gained in certain directions by her release from leading strings, even though held by Nature herself.

The work and genius of Charles John Collings, whose bold pencil sketch is reproduced, I hope to speak of later, more especially in reference to his beautiful and extraordinary water color drawings of the Rocky Mountains, which constitute in the considered judgment of our foremost critics, the most unique revelation in the art of this generation.



*SEARCHLIGHTS—Pencil Drawing by Charles John Collings*Courtesy Carroll Gallery



Robert M. Sweitzer
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